

HEALTH

Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition that is far more common than generally understood. First described in 1965, sleep apnea is a breathing disorder characterized by brief interruptions of breathing during sleep.

Who gets sleep apnea?

Sleep apnea occurs in all age groups and both sexes but is more common in men. It has been estimated that as many as 18 million Americans have sleep apnea. People most likely to have or develop sleep apnea include those who snore loudly, are overweight, have high blood pressure or have some physical abnormality in the nose, throat, or other parts of the upper airway. Sleep apnea seems to run in some families, suggesting a possible genetic basis.

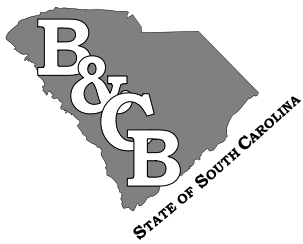
What causes sleep apnea?

Certain mechanical and structural problems in the airway cause the interruptions in breathing during sleep. In some people, apnea occurs when the throat muscles and tongue relax during sleep and partially block the opening of the airway. Sleep apnea also can occur in obese people when an excess amount of tissue in the airway causes it to be narrowed. With a narrowed airway, the person continues his or her efforts to breathe, but air cannot easily flow into or out of the nose or mouth. Unknown to the person, this results in heavy snoring, periods of no breathing and frequent abrupt changes from deep sleep to light sleep.

What are the effects of sleep apnea?

People with sleep apnea often feel very sleepy during the day and their concentration and daytime performance suffer. The consequences of sleep apnea range from annoying to life threatening. They include depression, irritability, sexual dysfunction, learning and memory difficulties and falling asleep at work, on the phone and while driving.

For more information on sleep apnea contact the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research at (301) 435-0199.



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